

## **Obama-Bloomberg gun control agenda worries Democrats heading into 2016**

**NRA reloads for another Second Amendment defense after last election's victories**

**By Seth McLaughlin**

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NASHVILLE, Tenn. — President Obama said this week that he hasn't given up on pushing for tighter gun controls, but many of his fellow Democrats in Congress are wishing he would drop it, having concluded that the issue is an electoral loser for them. If anything, they fear the politics are getting worse.

The politics of gun rights and gun control is a hot topic on the first full day of the National Rifle Association's three-day annual meeting, in particular the political peril involved in attacking the right to bear arms.

"Every time a Democrat starts talking about guns, they lose numbers because it is the Second Amendment," said Dave "Mudcat" Saunders, a Democratic strategist and lifelong gun owner. "How many gun owners are there in America now? Look it up. There is a bunch of them, and anytime you start talking about guns, you are going to take from your numbers. So there is just less talk [about gun control] now than there has been in forever."

They may not have a choice. Gun control groups, powered by potentially tens of millions of dollars from former New York City Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, vow to press the issue and force candidates to take a stand.

Indeed, the Bloomberg-funded Everytown for Gun Safety is holding an event on the sidelines of the NRA gathering at the Music City Center, with Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America and hundreds of gun safety advocates.

"We have been taking the fight for safer and more responsible gun laws to statehouses to Washington and corporations around the country, and that is why we are in Nashville this year, to call attention to how the NRA has been pushing dangerous legislation that hinders public safety in a number of states across the country, and we have been fighting them with some success for the first time in a long time," said Erika Soto Lamb, a spokeswoman for the group.

The gun control advocates will clearly be on the outside looking in on the NRA gathering, which is attracting tens of thousands of gun enthusiasts. It also is drawing most of the emerging field of

likely Republican presidential hopefuls — including former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, Gov. Scott Walker of Wisconsin, and Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas — who are expected to pledge their fidelity to the Second Amendment and to gun owners nationwide.

NRA leaders already have begun talking with key financiers about doubling the financial resources they applied last year when they won several key races that helped tilt the Senate to Republican control, possibly having as much as \$60 million to \$70 million to fight a candidate like Hillary Rodham Clinton.

The near unity among Republicans on gun rights contrasts with the Democratic divide on the issue, underscoring how the politics appear to have swung in the GOP's favor.

"It is a loser for the Democrats and so they shy away from it — except in Washington, D.C., or New York, where they have a strong liberal constituency and where it is not going to cost them votingwise," said Robert A. Levy, of the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute.

Democrats pushed gun control legislation after the 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, that left 20 students and six educators dead and ignited a national debate over gun ownership.

### **Obama push**

Mr. Obama pledged to use "all the powers of this office" to champion more restrictive policies. He also called on lawmakers to limit ammunition and semi-automatic firearms sales, and to expand background checks.

Lawmakers rejected Mr. Obama's demands and shot down a bipartisan push from Sens. Joe Manchin III, West Virginia Democrat, and Patrick J. Toomey, Pennsylvania Republican, to expand background checks to gun shows and online sales.

Roughly two years later, there is little indication that serious gun control legislation can pass — in particular after Republicans seized control of the Senate in the November elections.

Public opinion also has shifted. The Pew Research Center released a poll in December that found for the first time in two-plus decades of Pew surveys that there was more support for gun rights than gun control.

"The power of NRA and the gun lobby in Congress is formidable," Mr. Obama told ABC News this week. "And you know, we're going to keep chipping away at this, but until you get intense public demands for this, it's probably not going to happen because some special interests and lobbyists in Washington are really, really strong and their membership feels very intensely about the issue. Whereas the general public is concerned about it, but doesn't make it their top priority."

Andrew Arulanandam, a spokesman for the NRA, said the credit goes to NRA members and their allies.

"They are a powerful voting bloc," Mr. Arulanandam said. "They know there are a lot of powerful folks and wealthy folks who want to destroy the Second Amendment."

The battle over gun rights has heated up at the state level, where the Bloomberg-funded Everytown for Gun Safety is fighting for stricter background checks at gun shows and against efforts to allow concealed weapons in schools.

"We are not taking our eye off of Washington, but there is a lot of activity happening in the states and I think for the first time in a long time the NRA is facing the real people of those states who are coming out and opposing legislation that forces guns into schools and parks and actually scales back public safety measures," Ms. Lamb said.

Mike McKenna, a Republican Party strategist, said Mr. Bloomberg has "no credibility" on the issue in the eyes of gun rights advocates and that the last thing Democrats want is to pick a fight over guns. "Because when they do, the people on the other side go nuts," he said.

He also said Democrats are afraid of the issue because they are not comfortable talking about it.

"The truth of the matter is the idea of a Democrat, as constructed by Hollywood, is that they are these blue-collar guys from the middle of the country, who are union guys, own guns and go hunting," he said. "That is a beautiful story. But for the most part, those guys are dead," Mr. McKenna said.

Mr. Saunders, meanwhile, said the divide over guns is "geographical and cultural."

"If you get my part of the world, the southern Appalachian Mountains and west Texas and places like this, guns are just part of our culture," he said. "I talk to friends who live in urban environments, and they are good people and their culture says guns are a bad thing. It is because their culture is different than mine."

Mr. Saunders added, "I was born with a gun and I will die with a gun."